

# River Otter Life History

The Division of Wildlife Resources river otter reintroduction program on the Green River below Flaming Gorge Reservoir has prompted many questions about these playful members of the weasel family. Here is a brief life history of these fascinating animals:

### Life Cycle

Litter size has been reported from one to six but most litters are two or three pups. The pups are born blind, toothless and totally helpless. They grow rapidly and emerge from their den at about two months. Soon after they emerge, the family unit, a female and pups (the male does not help raise the young) usually move to an area with more abundant prey. The young will begin feeding on some solid foods at about eight weeks old and are usually self-sufficient by five to six months. They will usually stay with their mothers until seven or eight months or until just before the birth of a new litter. Siblings will stay together for their first 12 to 13 months before dispersing into new territories.

River otters mature in two to three years and females can have a litter every year but some populations tend to alternate years. While male otters have been known to mate at age two, they usually are not very successful until they are five to seven years old. Otters, in captivity, have lived over 20 years but the age estimate in the wild is between 10 to 15 years. It usually takes a few years before otters reach their maximum length and weight, 35 to 54 inches and 11 to 33 pounds respectively. Males are generally larger than females and northern otters are generally larger than southern otters.

Otters set up loosely guarded home ranges, usually from one to two miles of shoreline. Some studies have shown an overlap in the ranges. Normally, otters are not aggressive defenders, their ranges are maintained more by scent marking and mutual avoidance.

### Forage

Otters feed predominately on fish but crustaceans and amphibians can play a substantial role in an otter's diet. Given the opportunity, otters will also prey on birds, mammals and reptiles. Otters are generally considered beneficial to trout streams because studies have shown otters prey mostly on the slower moving, less desirable fish rather than on the trout.

### Behavior

The playful behaviors otters are known for are mostly seen in the young. The adults do play but only occasionally. These playful behaviors, such as chasing each other, are essential for the young otters to develop coordination and to tone their fishing and survival skills.

### Fur

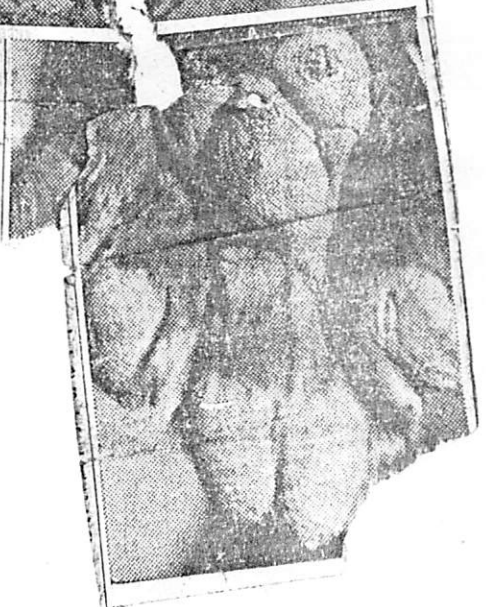
The otter depends on the insulative qualities of its fur to keep it warm, unlike whales and seals which have a layer of blubber to insulate them from the cold. The fur has two layers a short, dense, soft underfur and a longer, stiffer protective outerfur. The combination traps air to insulate the body when the otter submerges. An otter must constantly clean its fur to maintain its insulative quality.

SHOP  
AT  
HOME

## Rare Otter Specimen Trapped Near Heber



Mr. and Mrs. Harry N. Olsen display a large otter, one of the few if any of its kind left in the state. This unusual specimen of the weasel family was caught by Mr. Olsen, a state trapper, in one of his beaver traps in the Provo River near Heber. An enlargement of one of the otter paws at the left shows its ice creepers which make the otter as at home on ice as he is in water or on land. Photographs by Leo Kay, state game warden.



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## Girl Views Carcass Of Only Otter Found 'Wild' In Utah



Miss Ida Pace, above, thinks a great deal of her fine skunk fur coat but she wonders how the "Utah Otter" fur would look around her shoulders. Miss Pace is examining the mounted carcass of it only otter definitely known to have chosen this state as a place of abode.

According to Newell B. Cook, state fish and game commissioner, Utah has been devoid

of otters for about forty years and the stranger probably wandered from his Wyoming birthplace. Mr. Cook keeps the mounted animal in his office. The animal was trapped last fall by a deputy game warden who was hunting beaver in a canal near Heber City. The warden noticed queer webbed tracks along the banks of the canal for some time but was unable to identify the marks until he finally made the catch